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# Wedding Professionals Come to Aid of Chaotic Families

By Lena Smirnova

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A tamada dancing with a bride at a wedding banquet. Tamadas used to be respected family members, but now the tradition has a more commercial tone. **Vladimir Filonov**

Every weekend, Mikhail Vasin suits up for the unexpected.

The lanky 31-year-old is no stranger to performing under pressure, having spent his college years as a member of an improvisational acting group, which was appropriately named Risk. However, that experience hardly matches up to the risks Vasin faces today.

Now, common job hazards include airborne tomatoes, deoxygenated workspaces, half-naked audiences and stone-faced people reciting greeting card poetry.

Vasin is a tamada, the Georgian term for a toastmaster at a feast, which has also become a common part of the Russian lexicon and social life.

He says the title of his profession with an exaggerated Georgian accent and a reverent, upward

jab of his index finger to emphasize the top-notch caliber of the profession.

"This job is different from an organized, cultured performance on stage in front of the 200 to 300 civilized people who come to a theater," Vasin said. "They won't throw tomatoes at you. They won't swear at you and won't provoke conflicts. And they're sober."

Traditionally in the Caucasus, the tamada was a respected family member or friend who would be entrusted with leading festive banquets, such as weddings, anniversaries and birthday parties.

The tradition continues, but now it frequently takes a more commercial — and professional — tone. The pay can be quite good, and weddings are a particularly profitable sector.

Prices for regular tamadas are between 30,000 ($918) and 50,000 rubles, media personalities such as radio hosts and theater actors can get up to 150,000 rubles, and well-known celebrities start at 20,000 euros ($24,500).

Hired tamadas readily step into the role of respected relative to lead wedding guests through a series of entertaining games such as charades or mindreading and, when necessary, manage conflicts between warring uncles and mutinous mothers-in-law.

## "Tamada, accordionist, services"

Those who live in Moscow may have come across the scribbled advertisements of the city's most notorious tamada. In 2006, the messily written words "tamada, accordionist, services" began to appear on Moscow buildings, garages, construction sites, electrical poles and fences.

There were so many of these makeshift ads around the city that members of the Live Journal blogging site even formed a fan group to announce "the coming of the tamada."

Most tamadas, however, still prefer more subtle marketing ploys. Websites, social media sites and personal recommendations are the usual ways newly engaged couples find a master for their wedding ceremonies when relatives are not solicited to take up the role.

Alexei Mayorov, director of the Scarlett Star wedding agency, picks tamadas for his clients based on their budget and basic preferences regarding gender and age.

The agency has a database of about 50 tamadas with whom it collaborates. Mayorov selects several candidates from the database to meet with the engaged couple.

Scarlett Star also has a lineup of tamadas who are willing to do themed weddings.

"Each [tamada] has his own basic image," Mayorov said. "Not everyone can dress up and reincarnate into some character such as a sea captain."

Acting experience comes in handy when leading a themed wedding.

Svetlana Svetlaya has gone from playing a mother-hero in an amateur theater to playing a witch at Ukrainian-themed weddings. She recently did a rock music wedding, for which she had to learn the appropriate slang.

"The most important thing is to create a festive atmosphere," Svetlaya said.

Most weddings don't require such meticulous preparations as themed weddings do. Svetlaya said only 10 percent of the average 60 weddings she does per year are themed. Her pre-event prep is thus usually limited to meeting the couple once or twice to discuss what they want their wedding party program to look like.

### A man's world

Svetlaya has a website and good references, which makes her a unique case in an otherwise male-dominated business. Online ads for other female tamadas tend to be found on forum boards without the pictures and video rOsumOs that are key to getting clients.

Overall, there are fewer females in the profession, and they are paid less.

Female tamadas are not in demand partially because it is difficult for them to control boisterous wedding crowds, Mayorov said. He has only one or two options in his database for clients who request a woman to lead their festivities.

Svetlaya said female humor tends to be underrated, and she herself dislikes her female colleagues' inclination to recite poems and jump up in octaves when speaking.

"For people to say about me 'Oh, that was a great tamada,' I need to be three heads above the men," Svetlaya said.

English-speaking tamadas are also rare. Although 10 to 15 percent of clients at Scarlett Star are foreigners, there are few bilingual tamadas. Some couples are just happy to hire a Russian native and follow his hand gestures, Mayorov said.

Vasin said he learned English by watching MTV in the 1990s, and he can switch to that language for an extra 5,000 rubles. So far, he has received one such request.

### Dodging tomatoes

Not all couples who call Vasin become his clients.

Vasin said he can usually tell by the caller's voice how respectful the guests will be toward the tamada, and he has turned down some people he deemed too provincial.

"A wedding plan meant for intellectuals will be boring for less intellectual people," Vasin said. "There is not enough meat there. There is not enough of rolling oranges from one pant leg to the next. This is very 'funny,' you know."

To his credit, Vasin has also taken up several celebrations that were out of his comfort zone. Notably, he once led a wedding for a couple of newlywed prison workers and their guest colleagues.

Problems with unemotional or overly enthusiastic guests are some of the most common. Mayorov has had to subdue a best man who took his shirt off and rein in female guests who requested a nude photo session with a variety of wedding props.

For Svetlaya, the most dreaded partygoer is the unemotional one. In one such case, she had to entertain a group of somber guests who, even during the official ceremony at City Hall, looked as if they were at a funeral.

"There is a feeling like you're pulling a very, very heavy cart up a mountain. All of the 60 or so guests at a wedding are in that cart, and you're pulling them up," Svetlaya said.

While the tamada's work isn't always as colorful as it looks, Svetlaya doesn't plan to leave the business. She has even trained her daughter to become a tamada.

Vasin wants to grow professionally by developing online resources for booking tamadas. Still, he said he doesn't want his entire career to be summed up with that one reverently raised finger.

"I enjoy this work," he said. "But I wouldn't want my grandchildren to say 'our grandfather is a tamada' or for my gravestone to be engraved with the words 'here lies a tamada.'"

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